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VanGampeleare

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August VanGampeleare, a former USS Oklahoma (BB-37) Sailor and Pearl Harbor attack survivor, spoke these words - his blue eyes welling with tears - in front of the 1,177 names on the Arizona Memorial Shrine Room wall.



He sobbed audibly, his voice and hands trembled, not because of his 78 years of age, but because of the powerful rush of memories filling him again.

After more than half a century of life experiences, the events of Dec. 7, 1941 are still vividly burned into his memory.

"I was taking a shower at the time (when Pearl Harbor was attacked) and I thought it (torpedo or bomb impacting Oklahoma) was another ship that hit us," he recalled. "She started listing. I started going up the ladder and into the passageway. The soapy mess water made it very slippery. I don't know how I made it out of there." He recounted how difficult it was to make it out of his Seaman's berthing below decks. Once topside he realized they were under attack, and how he wound up in the oil and fire-

filled waters of Pearl Harbor, struggling for his life.

"I looked up and saw the Japanese aircraft flying in formation over us and I knew then that we were under attack," he said slowly. "I saw the Arizona go up. It was like striking a match. I saw the flash and that was all. Afterward, I didn't hear anything."

By the time he made it to the weather decks, the ship had begun capsizing.

"I slid down the side of the ship and started swimming, but was getting tired," he recalled.

"I went down and came up two, three or four times."

His eyes began welling again and he paused. His voice cracked as he recalled how he was rescued just at his strength's end.

"I don't know where the ... the launch came from ... I think it was from the hospital ship ... They picked me up and took me to Ford Island."

Oklahoma sank in open ocean while being towed to the west coast. She was one of only a few ships, including Arizona and Utah, unable to be repaired to fight against the Japanese.

This past December, photographic evidence came to light showing a Japanese midget sub launched a deadly torpedo attack against Oklahoma. She capsized almost immediately after the attack; 449 Oklahoma Sailors were killed. Thirty-nine others were trapped inside, banging on the ship's outer hull and were later rescued.

Wednesday, Mar. 1, VanGampeleare, or "Augie" as his friends call him, set foot aboard the Arizona Memorial for the first time since the attack. On his first trip to Pearl Harbor in 1973, the Memorial was undergoing renovations and was closed to the public.

This day, he was proudly wearing a blue Oklahoma ball cap, matching Oklahoma shirt and two leis as he made his way to the Memorial.

As if completing a pilgrimage, he determinedly navigated through scores of visitors, walked to the front of the Arizona Memorial's Shrine Room and stood in front of the stark, white marble wall inscribed with the names of the fallen Arizona Sailors and Marines.

He stood erect, gazing at the wall, looking from one side to the other, but after a moment, his memories came rushing back.

His slender frame began to shiver, forcing him to turn away to sit on his wheeled walker, sobbing for those lost Servicemen.

"They should still be here...," he said tearfully.

Many others in the crowded space were also moved to tears, whispering to those around them and him, asking who he was, then thanking him for his service.

He turned and slowly left the Shrine Room. He made his way to the Memorial's well. He took off one of the leis and placed its flowers, one by one, into the waters above the

Arizona with the aid and camaraderie of a Naval officer, Lt. Ken Mulder, Naval Submarine Support Command, who was also moved and honored to assist the elder Sailor.

They spoke of decades-old battles fought, of friends and times gone by, sharing in the common honor of being in the Naval service.

"For all the things he went through, he had nothing but good things to say about the Navy and his life," Mulder said of VanGampeleare.

After Pearl Harbor, VanGampeleare went on to fight on several destroyers throughout the Pacific Theater until the war's conclusion.

"I was never hurt or anything," he said. "I've been blessed with that."

Fifty-eight years later, he returned to Pearl Harbor a veteran, a hero and a survivor of a tragedy that, years later, ended in triumph.

After leaving the Memorial, he visited Pearl Harbor's Building One, the work site of the intelligence unit who cracked a Japanese code - helping to turn the tide of the war in the Pacific. Their work made the naval victory at Midway possible.

VanGampeleare stopped at Building One to see some of the remnants of Oklahoma. An auxiliary steering wheel and black and white Oklahoma salvage photos are almost all that is left of the once mighty fighting ship.

The photos depict Oklahoma in her pre-war years, in her glory days at sea while other photos show the massive capsized hull of Oklahoma being righted.

Nearly completing his voyage of reflection and remembrance, VanGampeleare gazed across the harbor.

Berthed where the Oklahoma was struck and capsized proudly rests 'Mighty Mo', the battleship on which representatives of the Allied Forces and the Japanese signed the instrument of Japan's unconditional surrender.

"That's a beautiful battleship," Augie said speaking of the Missouri. "They don't make them like that anymore."

On December 6th, 1941 the Oklahoma pulled into Pearl Harbor with a crew of 1,354 sailors and officers. She moored next to the USS Maryland in Battleship Row. The crew was ready for a beautiful Sunday Hawaiian shore leave.

Sunday morning arrived quietly. Augie was preparing to go on shore leave for the day. At 7:55 a.m. he was taking a shower, he felt a vibration. His first thought was that another ship had bumped into the Oklahoma. The vibration he felt was the first of three torpedoes slamming into the ship. She took two more direct hits as the ship began to list to the port side. The Oklahoma took five direct hits and sank in just 15 minutes.

Augie, along with other crew members began making their way topside. It wasn't an easy task, as water poured into the hallways and the ship was already listing. Augie and his shipmates were struggling to make it out of a sinking ship. When he reached the top deck he slid down the side into the harbor waters.

Augie remembers sinking to the bottom of the harbor three times as he swam for safety. Each time his feet would touch the bottom, his instinct for survival would push him back up to the top. As he summoned what he thought was the last bit of energy to break the top of the water, a rescue boat came by and saved him from certain death.

Augie still remembers vividly the details of that day. He says that every time he sank to the



USS OKLAHOMA BATTLESHIP

The USS Oklahoma was struck by five torpedoes and within 15 minutes had completely capsized immersing guns and masts in the mud of Pearl Harbor. There were 32 men trapped inside the ship for approximately three days. The Oklahoma lost 395 enlisted men and 20 officers.

The USS Oklahoma was eventually righted. She was decommissioned in 1944. In 1946 she was made seaworthy, sold for scrap and later sank in heavy seas while being returned to the United States.

bottom of the harbor, his feet would touch the slime on the bottom. He can still feel that slime touching his feet.

Naturally, he shows emotion when he speaks of his shipmates

"She wasn't going to the scrap pile..... she sank to rest at Davey Jones Locker"

says Augie, with emotion, as he speaks of the USS Oklahoma

and his ship. The Oklahoma lost over 400 crewmen that Sunday morning.

For the Oklahoma, the war was already over, but for Augie, it was just beginning.

Mr. VanGampelcare went on to serve on the USS Chester, a

Heavy Cruiser during the Marshall and Gilbert Island campaigns. He finished an 8 year enlistment with the US Navy while serving on the Aircraft Carrier USS Enterprise in 1948.

Augie has lived a quiet and peaceful life since the war. He worked as an Electronic Inspector and retired from Amphenal Electronics in Broadview. He has lived in Parkview Mobile Home Park for about the last 30 years.

On December 1st, 2001 Augie left for a two week trip back to the Hawaiian Islands. This is his third trip back since the war ended. As a Pearl Harbor Survivor, he was invited by the National Park Service to attend this years 60th Anniversary Memorial Ceremony. He will be escorted onto the Memorial, with other survivors of the attack, to attend this special anniversary service.

On that day, December 7th, 1941 America lost over 2,400 lives at Pearl Harbor. With the recent events of September 11th, Pearl Harbor has even more significance. We as Americans should never forget the tragic events that make our history. But even more important, we need to recognize how these events bring us together and unite our great nation.

With citizens like August VanGampelcare, this country will never fail. We will stand tall and proud for the just cause.